DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 080 SO 032 315

| | |
|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Newman, Sally |
| TITLE | Rationale for Linking the Generations. |
| INSTITUTION | Pittsburgh Univ., PA. Center for Social and Urban Research. |
| REPORT NO | GT-130 |
| PUB DATE | 1997-00-00 |
| NOTE | 12p.; For related documents from the same preparing institution, see SO 032 313-316. Tel: 412-648-7150. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | Generations Together Publications, 121 University Place, Suite 300, Pittsburgh, PA 15260-3907 ($1.50). |
| PUB TYPE | Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Futures (of Society); *Intergenerational Programs; *Older Adults; Service Learning; *Social Change; *Youth |
| IDENTIFIERS | Intergenerational Learning; Intergenerational Relationship |

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the negative aspects of generational isolation and outlines the developmental needs shared by younger and older people. The paper cites intergenerational models, such as community centers, places of worship, colleges and universities, and nursing homes, in which generations interact in a substantive way. It suggests there is evidence that mobility trends may be changing and projects societal outcomes for 2000 and beyond. (BT)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 448 080

University of Pittsburgh

*University Center for Social and Urban Research*
*Generations Together: An Intergenerational Studies Program*

121 University Place, Suite 300
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15260-5907
412-648-7150
Fax: 412-624-4810

# RATIONALE FOR LINKING THE GENERATIONS

**Prepared by**

**Sally Newman, Ph.D.**
**Executive Director**

SO 032 315

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S. Newman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

**1980**
**Revised 1997**



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

*Transforming the Present — Discovering the Future*

## Introduction

Since the earliest period in the development of the human family, consistent interaction between generations has resulted in mutual learning and mutual support. Elders throughout the ages have been part of the main stream of growth in villages, towns and in nations. They have been models of stability and continuity of the world's cultures. They have been career models for a community's young, spiritual and artistic leaders, advisors in government, surrogate parents, decision makers, and the sages throughout the ages, and always integrated with all generations as part of the natural process of life.

In the United States the role of older people had traditionally been integral to the growth of our families and our communities. For generations the extended family's living had been the norm. However, within the last four decades changes have occurred in our society that have resulted in the virtual disappearance of the extended family and a dramatic decrease in the amount of significant interaction between the generations.

Economic changes since the late 1940's caused the movement of young nuclear families away from their roots and their elders. The geographic separation of the family members has resulted in infrequent contact between the generations and has yielded a change in lifestyles, a change in values, and a change in attitudes toward aging. Reduced contact between the elders and the youngers has resulted in:

1. the absence of mutual support between the generations
2. an absence of mutual learning between the generations
3. a growing lack of understanding between the generations
4. an increasing unfamiliarity with the aging process as a natural process in the continuum of life.

## Isolated generations

As families remain separated over long periods of time the elders often respond to their lack of involvement in the family's development with feelings of rejection, loneliness and

purposelessness. Elders who share these feelings often develop peer relationships and soon become part of a world of senior citizens isolated from the rest of society. We soon develop communities of homogeneous cohort groups (young families, middle-aged couples, or senior citizens) in which there is very limited interaction between the generations. The special strengths of multi-generational communities are lost. The support, growth, learning, and caring that the generations had shared are not available and the interaction that was consistent and frequent throughout a lifetime is absent, and this absence can have a negative effect on the society's values and life styles.

Coupled with this isolation that has developed as an outgrowth of economic change is another form of isolation that has developed because of the "Special Group Status" associated with older Americans. Departments of Aging, in an effort to demonstrate a concept for the needs of senior citizens, have developed programs that address the psychological, physical, and emotional needs of the country's elderly as a group separate from other population groups. Senior citizens have been viewed as a special population for whom unique programs needed to be devised. Housing, health care, economic support, and transportation for the elderly have been issues of special concern that have set them apart from other groups for whom these issues are equally relevant. A consequence of this special group treatment has been another form of isolation of the nation's elderly. Recent research has shown the negative impact of this isolation on the attitudes and health of the elders and on the attitudes and behaviors of younger members in society and has pointed to serious problems that are developing because of the lack of contact between the generations. (Marks, 1980; Harris, 1975; Seefeldt, 1977)

Fear of aging, stereotyping by young and old, hostility between the generations, ignorance about aging, and a deterioration of the mind and spirit of the elderly are some of the problems that need to be addressed. Many persons are concerned about this problem and have begun to examine alternatives in society that will provide opportunities for the generations to learn from each other, to support each other, to understand each other, and to develop meaningful relationships.

**Shared needs**

We know that historically there has been a kinship between the younger and older generations and as we explore some of these alternatives it is important that we understand some of the possible reasons for this kinship, since through this understanding more effective intergenerational alternatives can be offered.

It has been suggested by colleagues in human development that there are some developmental needs shared by younger and older people that may be the root of their simpatico. For both young and old there is a need to:

- develop self-esteem. The young are working toward establishing an acceptable identity and the old are concerned that their values and identity are no longer acceptable in a changing society
- maintain the links between the past and the future. The young need to gain a perspective about their roots, and a security for tomorrow. Single parent families, limited grandparent contact, and the changing communities have made the need to make connections essential for young people. The old have a need to recognize that their past is connected to today and tomorrow so they can draw upon it as a means of establishing continuity
- feel competent. In a highly technological society young and old are technologically unsophisticated and need to develop other areas of strength through which to gain confidence
- for a sense of place. A society that rewards the givers, those who contribute in the work place, who develop our technology and sustain our economy, does not reward the young and old who are perceived of as takers, as uneducated, as weak and poor. Both of these groups need to find their place of dignity and respect

Aware of some of these needs we can begin to exchange ideas and collaborate on the creation of opportunities for intergenerational experiences in our society that can address some of the problems we face as a result of a lack of meaningful contact between the generations. We



pubsipuvlinkage.130

need to develop programs and experiences that give to elders a sense of pride, self-worth, and purposefulness and give to young people a sense of belonging, security, knowledge and meaning.

**Intergenerational models**

There are presently models that are being developed in which generations are interacting in a substantive way building bonds, learning and growing together. These models involve a variety of groups and occur in many settings. Each should be considered for its merits based upon its usability, its impact on the persons it will serve, its transferability and the needs of a given community. For example, a number of intergenerational experiences are being developed in senior citizen centers where younger persons from the community come to the center to facilitate or participate in activities related to physical fitness, the arts, and group dynamics. In some centers groups of young persons, frequently teenagers or younger, come to learn from the center members. As an outgrowth of these experiences, oral history projects, collaborative art and musical projects and expanded multi-generation community projects have been developed. Center sponsored cross-generational lectures, shared meals and outings (with members of the community) offer another opportunity to develop bonds between non-elderly community residents and senior citizen center members.

In another setting involving older persons (i.e., nursing homes) intergenerational programming can occur in a variety of forms. The residents in need of physical and psychological support are beginning to work with a special population equally in need of support. In several nursing homes in the United States, particularly in Southern California and in Florida, groups of mentally retarded children are brought to the home to work together in creative drama, dance, music, and muscle development programs. These two populations who have been neglected by mainstream society find in each other a camaraderie that has had a positive effect on improving their mental and physical health. In the nursing home settings, where residents are mobile and have special skills, another intergenerational opportunity exists in which the institutionalized elder can provide service to younger persons; school age children brought to the homes can learn



pubs\pubvlink.doc,130

special skills and can develop special friendships often not available within their own nuclear families. As children learn from these elders they provide as an exchange love and warmth to a needy, often forgotten population.

Another intergenerational model that is gaining in popularity exists in universities and colleges. Some offer certificates, degrees or non-credit adult education courses to senior citizens. The elders participate at minimum costs in course offerings in which they are part of the mainstream student population. Several other university models include courses available at centers and high rises, and the elder hostel concept that involves younger faculty and older persons in programs designed exclusively for the older participants. In the elder hostel model, senior citizens are resident students for special programs during specific periods of the year. Still another model has young university students interact with the community's elders as part of their field site experiences in a variety of specialties. The work, play and living areas of the elders bcome the school room for the students.

Another setting for substantive intergenerational experiences can be places of worship. Much of the church activity today involves homogeneous groupings (teenagers, couples, women's groups, elders, young children's groups). Some churches, however, are now making efforts to bring the generations together by creating specific cross- generational activities (for example - lectures on the role of all generations in the family, ethnic cooking for all generations and cross-generational hobby exchange).

Others are:

- Community centers and Y's that have traditionally provided single sex, homogeneous age activities are beginning to schedule multi-age trips, and bring-a-friend-of-another-age programs.
- Industry is beginning to develop programs in which retirees as advisors, consultants, and recruiters continue to participate in the life of a company that for many years had been their life.

- Other social institutions like family and children's agencies, prisons, and hospitals are examining the use of senior citizens as role models and support persons to their clients.
- A recent model for providing intergenerational experiences has been public education. Since the early 1970s some cities, towns, and rural communities in the United States have begun to develop programs that bring the community's elders into schools as volunteers. In cities like Seattle, Houston, Boston, St. Louis, New York, and Miami and rural areas like parts of Maine and New Hampshire, smaller towns in the mid-west, senior citizens are working with children in classrooms enhancing their emotional, social and academic growth. As tutors, career models, hobbyists and friends, over 35,000 senior citizen volunteers are contributing to the social, emotional and academic development of children. In exchange they receive warmth, respect, and the inner rewards that the recognition of worth yields. For the 40% of the population of children and elders who only have annual or semi-annual visits with their kin, these classroom relationships become the meaningful substitutes for the extended family.

In many of the intergenerational models referred to here, the elders are interacting with others by giving service and volunteering their lifelong skills, knowledge and wisdom. The role of senior citizens as volunteers in our society is a major means of safeguarding against their social isolation. It has been estimated that 22% of persons over 60 are involved in volunteering in the United States and it is in this population that we find the nation's healthiest and most productive elders.

In these intergenerational models, the effectiveness of each program is contingent upon some basic consideration. The effectiveness is often dependent upon their ability to provide needed service to the community. Therefore, the goals of an intergenerational program must be based upon the needs of the generations in the community. The community as participants should

be involved in the development of these programs. Their effectiveness can also be determined by their ability to foster meaningful relationships. These relationships can develop through experiences that are substantive and continuous. Therefore, programs need to include experiences that can sustain the interest of participants long enough for them to establish dependable and stable friendships.

**Changing trends and projected societal outcomes**

There is some evidence that family mobility trends may be changing. Economic projections from the Labor Department suggest that American families may be less likely to move in the next decade. An energy conscious economy that may focus on maintaining and expanding local business and industry rather than geographic expansion may reduce the necessity for family separation. Other trends that can effect the availability of interaction within the family's generations are the growing return of a family's elders from the Sun Belt areas to their roots, and the trend (limited as it may be) for a family's recent college graduates to seek job opportunities closer to the family's roots.

With the possibility of more consistent interaction with our families, coupled with a systematic and thoughtful effort to develop more effective nationwide intergenerational experiences, we may expect some of the following societal outcomes for our society in the year 2000 in which an estimated 35% of the population will be over 60 years of age.

1. The more generations interact the greater the potential for breaking down existing mutual stereotypes and for changing attitudes. Fears associated with being and growing old (Marks, 1980), and mutual distrust and lack of understanding (Harris, 1975; Kalish, 1975) can be replaced by acceptance, understanding, and mutual respect. The reported data from the Marks study, in addition to informal reports from universities following implementation of intergenerational models, supports the probability of these changes occurring.

2. Collaboration in industry between young workers and the company's retirees can result in a rapid increase of work skills and the establishment of special adult relationships in a supportive and cohesive work force. The older persons with skills and maturity working at industrial or business settings as advisors and models have a positive impact on the climate of a work place. They can stimulate the growth and development of alternative social and economic patterns that incorporate the combined needs and strengths of a community's multi-generational population.

3. Involving all the generations in a community's growth may have significant economic implications for the entire community. The elders as useful productive citizens can extend their years of good health. Well persons use fewer hospital beds, therefore, the taxes supporting Medicare and Medicaid may be redirected to other community needs as the use of these funds is reduced.

The elders, furthermore, can provide services that communities could not buy. Among the estimated 35% of the population that will be 60+ by the year 2000, 85% can lead healthy and productive lives if they are meaningfully integrated into the life of the community. The senior citizen in the community can become a vital new element in the labor force. As experienced caregivers the community's elders can be trained and paid to perform child care services and supportive services in hospitals and other social service agencies.

The community's senior citizens who have special skills or hobbies can occupy a significant role in perpetuating these skills in the life of the community. Retired elders from leadership roles can assist in the training of young people and can, therefore, be economically advantageous to industry. Retirees as recruiters, and ongoing resources for new employees in industry can be effective links



pub:pub\1inkdoc.130

between industry, the school systems and the community. They can facilitate communication and cooperation between these three segments of society. The community's senior citizens as career models can help young people understand the involvement, the benefits and the weaknesses of alternative careers.

4. Providing more opportunities for generations within families to interact can yield more cohesive family structure in which continuity is established. This continuity can add to the security of the family's young. It can also provide all family members with a sense of heritage and belonging that evokes stability and direction.

5. The impact of intergenerational experiences on society's institutions can be very significant:

in schools where the mutual supports derived by children and senior citizens can contribute to the social, psychological and intellectual growth of children and elders

in families where the presence of elders gives the family a sense of continuity, stability, nurturing and an awareness of the relationship between past, present, and future

in penal institutions where the elders as responsible models can provide understanding, wisdom and support and a possible direction for those paying for deviant behavior

in industry and labor where the elders as persons who have survived, changed, and coped with economic growth and decline can model for the young an acceptance, and a humbleness that will enable them to recognize that success means time, patience and work, and that meaningful effort does not yield instant gratification

in government elders as advisors can bring a perspective to decision making that reflects a view of the United States as a nation with thoughtful long-term goals that show concern for all of its citizens.

6. Finally, in a society fraught with factionalism, vested interest groups and disunity, intergenerational experiences must inevitably be viewed in the context of a unity in which continuity and collaboration can again be the focus of our society.

## Conclusion

The notion of intergenerational unity can result in developing substantive relationships that give meaning to people of all ages. The notion of intergenerational unity, furthermore, is perceived of by some sociologists as essential to the health of the human species since its survival may be related to the realization that we are all connected to one another.

## References


Harris, L. (1975). *The myth and reality of aging in America*. Washington, Dc: The National Council on the Aging.

Kalish, R. (1975). *Late adulthood: Perspectives on human development*. Monterey, CA; Brooks/Cole.

Marks, R. (1980). *Children's perceptions of the elderly: A quasi-experimental study of attitude change*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh.

Seefeldt, C., Jantz, R.K., Galper, A., Serock, K. (1977). *Children's attitudes toward the elderly: A study of curriculum implementation. Final report*. College Park, Md.: University of Maryland.